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Mackintosh, Christopher ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7798-5125> (2021) Introduction to qualitative research methodologies. In: Qualitative Research Methods. e-book Manchester Met University, 1 . Manchester Metropolitan University, pp. 1-9.

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**Version:** Accepted Version

**Publisher:** Manchester Metropolitan University

Please cite the published version

<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk>

## **Qualitative Research Methods**

### **Rationale for this online book**

This is an introductory textbook to set up your understanding as a student wishing to begin exploring the role, scope and methodologies around qualitative research. The book itself sets out to:

- Exploring the different types of methods and methodologies in the qualitative research
- Begin to understand the importance of research philosophy and its link with choice of method
- To embed understanding of qualitative research within your undergraduate or postgraduate research project
- To evaluate the different types of qualitative research data analysis methodologies that can form part of your research design
- To use 'applied' researcher vignettes or stories from the field to contextualise qualitative research

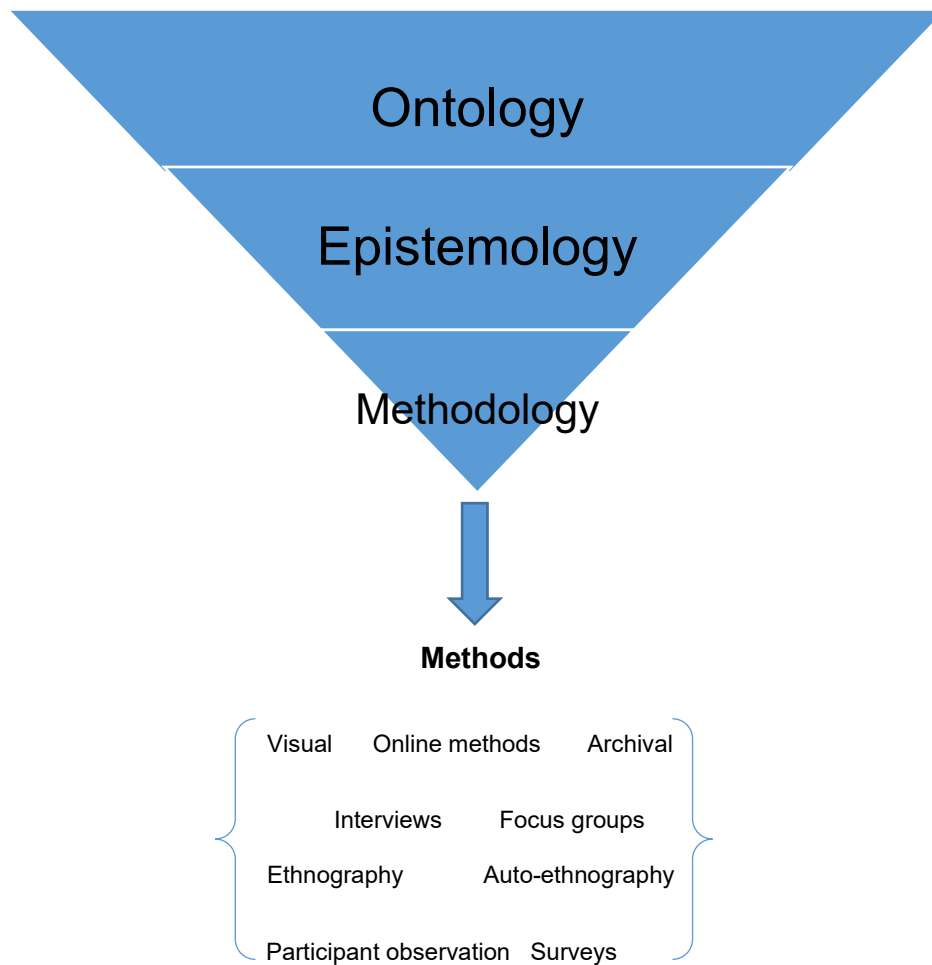
### **Introduction**

Qualitative research is ultimately data design, collection, analysis and write up that prioritises exploring, identifying and understanding meanings, attitudes, beliefs of social phenomenon in sport (Jones, Brown and Holloway, 2013; Long, 2007; Sparkes and Smith, 2014). It may be that it is located within a broad sociological, cultural, political or historical set of theoretical ideas and frameworks to understand certain aspects of sport in a research project. For example, you want to explore coach behaviours in an after-school club through observing their social interactions with children and other coaches. The questions you then need to start shaping are which methods are most appropriate, why you will use them and then consider what the literature suggest about those methods of data collection that may be a strength and weakness for your project. You will also need to gather up, in this case the observation fieldwork data, and analyse it using a selected qualitative research analysis technique. These

are a little like the statistical test equivalent you would apply in a quantitative survey many people are more familiar with. Imagine gathering a whole collection of survey data and then not analysing but just presenting raw data. As a minimum you would ask yourself to conduct an average, median, some percentages and basic descriptive statistics.

Qualitative research for many though is about working in the area of their passion, both methodological and empirical. So for example some people only ever conduct interviews as this is where they get the data, interaction and consequent analysis and quality of rich and textured findings they seek. It is the essence of their epistemological beliefs that this is how we build observations that shed light on the multiple realities in society (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). Equally, it can also be that ethnographers enjoy the deep immersion in subcultures (surfers, coaches, teachers or elite sportswomen in a specific sport or club), as their route to insight and accessing meanings that are at the centre of their research project and individual ontology. Ontology here being their world view, or philosophy of what reality itself actually is (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). If for example you have a belief in the social fact that there are multiple realities, with multiple contested individual social identities that co-exist in spaces and places this alters what research strategy you will engage with.

As we move through the book, there are numerous examples of 'types' of methods that students as they consider qualitative research paradigms and approaches to research design will uncover. This should not be considered a neat catalogue to select from, instead you need to familiarise yourself with the literature on a complex landscape of contrasting techniques that 'fit' with the research philosophy, ideas and beliefs that you hold. This said, it also shows the diversity in methods that are available in the field that give you a huge variation in how you can mesh research questions, with design and theory.



**Figure 1: Visual representation of research philosophy and the research process driving choice of methodology and method**

As figure 1 above illustrates the research process is driven by the individual researcher's world view or what is also known as their ontological stance or position. This book is not intended as a guide through such different ontologies or epistemologies, which represent the belief of how we should conduct and design research to engage with social phenomenon. But in the focus of this book being on qualitative research there is a natural skew towards methodologies, methods and processes of analysis where to increase our understanding in some aspect of sport and its many cultures. These could be within sport coaching, behaviour of athletes, motivation of school children, management approaches of sport development officers or interpreting the impact of a national governing body (NGB) initiative to sustain sport participation or levels of volunteering. The key two things to acknowledge for the

undergraduate qualitative researcher are, firstly that philosophy does underpin research practice and secondly that such view(s) then underpin practices and choices in research. For postgraduate researchers the depth and amount of awareness you will need to evidence and be able to understand will vary from that of the undergraduate.

Research methods that are qualitative in their nature are bound up with a central journey to uncover meaning (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). Underpinning such choices of method and methodology are theoretical paradigms and perspectives. Examples of such include interpretivism, hermeneutics, critical race theory, post-colonial theory, feminist theory, cultural studies and queer theory. This book does not position or prioritise specific theory. Indeed we encourage you as an early career researcher to familiarise yourself with theory that helps you make sense of your lived experienced, but also of your data and the research process. In qualitative research many researchers assume this is not a neat 'fit' of a linear research set of steps. You may for example shift research stance through uncovering the influential published theoretical work of certain authors, this in turn many shape your research strategy and data collection. It is however, highly likely that your response to the questions below may need close attention in terms of interpretive paradigms:

- Ontological questions: what is the very nature of our reality? How/why do we exist?
- Epistemological questions: What is the relationship between researcher and 'what is known'?
- Methodological questions: How do we gain knowledge of the world we are in?

Within these questions sits a domain that the researcher undertakes qualitative research. The imaginary 'net' that contains answers to such questions may be termed a *paradigm* or *interpretive framework*.

For most university research projects at undergraduate or postgraduate masters level the starting point is an idea, a stepping off point into further research or a hunch of professional intrigue. Qualitative research embraces emotion, assumes bias and acknowledges the

positionality of the researcher (Mackintosh and Dempsey, 2017; Mackintosh and Medcalf, 2019a). By this we mean the 'who' of the researcher, what they represent and how who they are and where they come from shapes, or indeed fails to shape the research. Many of the research professionals in this book will refer to themselves as a researcher and the communities or individuals they work with in their stories from the field. Taking an idea and starting to shape it requires immersion in the qualitative literature. This does not mean ignoring quantitative sources and literature. They may provide the background context and overarching trend data on a topic or theme. However, they fail to embody the rich texture that anyone with an interpretivist leaning seeks. A headline statistic on the percentage of elderly swimmers that swim, fails to really unpick why they swim and the meaning of their swim to each other and as an individual. Perhaps the swim is their identity. Perhaps a lifeline to people in an otherwise lonely life. Similarly, in analysis of interviews with swimmers it will be about acknowledging the multiple interpretations of the data transcript and the need to take measures to embolden the quality, coherence and credibility. It is also about questioning the very terms such as generalisability, validity and reliability associated with quantitative data formed through positivism (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008).

Students need to take an idea and begin framing their idea as a research question with associated sets of aims and objectives. The exact nature of aims, objectives and questions will vary in part by research tradition that you follow and where you theoretically position yourself as a researcher. A sound central direction from the research question allows you to undertake a robust research literature review. Explanation of this is well documented and resources numerous, but do note that the earlier statement around research philosophy applies to the type of literature review you do and how you draw upon data and sources to build an empirical and theoretical review of your topic area that your question is examining. From here, an emerging research methodology and design will emerge. Clough and Nutbrown (2012) refer here to 'critical relationships', where concepts in research planning must come together. They suggest how research questions must clearly show how they align to the philosophy and

methodological planning of the study. In an oversimplified but useful example, this might be where a constructivist or relativist ontology aligns well with a interpretivist epistemology and a methodological design that draws on ethnography and in-depth interviews. This is one of the most fundamental hurdles in research design (for further exploration of this see Mackintosh and Medcalf, 2019).

### **Qualitative research: So what?**

Qualitative studies often seek to explain, to perform an analysis of why, how and in what ways? This desire to explore the behaviours and experiences of individuals has at its heart meaning. Human beings are meaning makers, meaning interpreters and meaning re-interpreters. This cycle of complex human relations can be seen in how we see multiple lenses on areas of sport policy that we assume unified truths on. Physical education, after school sport clubs, elite talent development and coach development in professional sport clubs. All these pillars of sport policy in the UK differ based on who you ask, when you have asked them and in what context. An elite swimmer's perspective on training and that of the primary school PE specialist will vary greatly. But perhaps most crucially so will two elite swimmers, who have come from different club backgrounds, experienced coaching philosophies and understand the meaning of training to have very different layers if they grew up in England and Scotland. Interpretation of data acquired from qualitative methods is shaped by the tools of analysis we select, and build into our design. Denzin and Lincoln (2011; 3) argue qualitative researchers "study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them". Returning to our example of the elite swimmer and their training, interviews might yield very different findings to an ethnography where you arguably would get increased access to the liminal spaces that are in the hinterland of public and private domains. If you undertook a grounded theory study this would typically take a very data driven approach to the study and using heavy coding analysis techniques to build new theoretical categories to help explain training. Finally, an observational study might allow you to quietly

pick up subtle nuances on training environments compared to the more direct interview process.

In more recent times opening up of research through visual methodologies and internet-based research has also created scope for new and exciting qualitative methods using video, photos and live streaming sources of data (Pink, 2012). This is also covered in this book, with its own challenges and opportunities explained for the student researcher. It is also a powerful domain for impressing the importance of ethical approval for research. Video, live internet, use of images and photos all enter the domain of sensitive research for the ethically informed researcher. But, this is not to mean research cannot and should not be undertaken. Just that the correct ethical processes need to be undertaken with care around consent, informed consent, ethical approval by institutions and gatekeepers.

### **Future challenges and dilemmas for qualitative research**

The chapters in this book, and specifically the accounts by the multiple researchers from diverse theoretical and substantive social science of sport subject backgrounds show the challenges facing the researcher. In tackling representation of the researcher increasingly we should acknowledge that present dilemmas are not the same as those of the last twenty years. Undergraduates operate in a social media and web-literate world where a potential participant can be as easily contacted through Zoom, Skype or Microsoft Teams. Studies can embrace chat spaces that are virtual, views and interpretations of meanings and beliefs can be downloaded as much as they need to be gathered over a fixed Dictaphone. This opens new spaces of opportunity for qualitative research for the project aiming to examine identity, opinions, behaviour or programme evaluation. However, with all that is new remains much of the constant concerns of research design, research philosophy and alignment of 'critical relationships' with methodologies (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). When all is said qualitative research of the future will remain an empirical quest to explore meanings, beliefs and understanding human behaviour. Sport offers a wide reaching and exciting crucible for unpicking such dynamics and relationships. For the student, this book offers a neat guide to



overseeing this quest in a logical, creative and exciting set of steps. Each individual chapter will explore the contemporary 'state of the art' in the chosen method, or form of analysis in qualitative methodologies being examined. It will then go on to unpick this supposed linear and rationale 'textbook' presentation in the much more nuanced and 'messy' route from idea to data collection in the realities of being a qualitative researcher. These series of vignettes provide the little spoken of set of reflective and reflexive accounts of researchers in the field dealing with data, problematic situations and difficulties that arise. It also will show the joys and passions that embody this field of qualitative researchers and bring to life the substantive topics, questions and research philosophies individuals and groups of researchers work through in their day-to-day lives.

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